

The Shape of a Hundred Hips

By Patricia Cumbie

The first time I saw a belly dancer was at a private party held at City Billiards in Minneapolis. That night, Habib emerged from the back of the poolroom, an orange silk veil held above her head that appeared to levitate behind her. Her body's movements were languid and deliberate. Her costume, a two-piece purple velvet outfit trimmed with rows of coins, flashed. She moved into the light and full view of the crowd. Habib wasn't a Barbie doll—she had jet black dreadlocks and an olive skin tone—her looks striking. She leveled her gaze at the crowd and executed a surprising and impetuous full turn. She looked exactly like a flame: purple velvet, orange silk, shiny coins blazing. Awe-struck, I nearly dropped my drink.

I'd thought about Habib over the next year. I was hanging out with arthritics and car crash victims, my life stalled. I'd been diagnosed with a muscle pain condition that forced me to work at putting my life and body in balance. I'd done physical therapy to regain strength in my arms, and the only time I ever felt buoyant was when I was at the therapeutic pool. I felt sorry for myself and manifested real and imagined anxieties about my future as a handicapped person. I worried about illness defining me. If I had a handicap parking permit, for example, would that mean I'd never get any better?

Before Habib finished dancing that night, people danced along with her, clapping, smiling, having an out-and-out good time. She stirred the entire crowd, and moved things up a notch emotionally, past the social obligation the party was meant to fulfill, to a real celebration. For months afterward, ensconced in an inner tube at the therapeutic pool, my legs dangling beneath me, I'd think, I want to do that.

Then came the day I got up the nerve to go to a Middle Eastern dance class. Midwinter afternoon sunlight coursed in from three sides of the dance studio onto a smooth and well-worn wooden floor. The floorboards, clean and unmarred, exuded a tanned and healthy glow, pampered by dancers who didn't want them afflicted by the cold or salt or sand tracked in on most Minnesota floors in winter. The floor soon was packed with women in yoga pants and tank tops angling for a place to stretch out. Some had scarves wrapped around their hips that jingled from the coins on them. I'd dressed in a t-shirt and hippie skirt, my tenuous gypsy heart shrinking by the second.

The tall blonde instructor wore pink leg warmers and a ballet neck top over a blue leotard. She looked to me like a refugee from *Flashdance*. I felt disappointed. I believed I needed a dark, sultry type to show me how to transfix people.

The instructor moved gazelle-like—her long hair swung behind her straight back when she turned. Then she marched us up and down the room doing hip snaps. She told us the catchy Spanish-Arab sounding music was by a famous Egyptian pop singer, Amr Diab. She smiled

while the class clumsily tried to mimic her hip and arm movements. When she taught us basic undulations, the movement Habib used in her entrance, I held my breath. The teach exhorted us to "keep breathing." She told us to lift our chests, and not be intimidated by our own breasts. "Let the movement flow from the top of the sternum through to the pelvis," she'd said. I felt scandalized and energized.

Last summer, I held a rummage sale with a friend. Among the items I had for sale were loose-fitting sundresses, blasé shirts and a one-piece swimsuit with a skirt, from my pool therapy days. Cindy picked up the swimsuit and laughed at it. At me. "I can't believe you ever wore this!" I couldn't either. Yet, for years I was so afraid of my body I'd hide it, and for so long felt helpless when it turned against me. In the warmth of that late August day, laughing with my friend about the cruddy swimsuit, I felt good.

I remembered the time a doctor gave me a prescription for Elavil. The doctor had been a full 40 minutes late to my appointment. While I waited for him I felt resigned and sad, moving my fingers in figure-eights over the white paper on top of the examining table. When he arrived, he touched the muscle pain pressure points on my shoulders, knees and hipbones with unabashed apathy. I tried to look into his eyes when he told me I needed antidepressants. A drowsy anger surged through my limbs and lingered in the pit of my stomach. When I got home, I called a therapist and ran the prescription with his indecipherable handwriting through my shredder.

I look back and see myself almost a decade ago, my shoulder sunk into my chest as I sat on a chair in my therapist’s office, and think, of course! That girl needed *something!* I’d been holding onto a secret; I’d been raped in my first year in college. I never told anyone because I felt ashamed and at fault: Even though I fought the guy; I had been drinking. Even though he held me pressed to the bed as I squirmed and scratched him; I had been a flirt. Even as he spread my legs and pushed himself into me; he dared me to report him.

In the years after the rape, the aftereffects built up in my life the way carcinogens cleave to fat in the body. Anger and helplessness streaked through my veins as a separate being that stored up lactic acids and doled out cramps as a punishment. I developed a habit of dissociating from my body whenever I felt anxious. I was looking down on it from far away—and the things I saw were pathetic. Drugs, drinking, fucked up boyfriends added layer upon layer of denial and forgetting. I was crippling myself emotionally and physically.

Which I was still in school, I worked for a social research professor who also ran the Program to Prevent Woman Abuse at a local mental health clinic. Everyday, I talked to women with abusive partners, dutifully recording their experiences on a scale of violence that would allow the professor to draw conclusions about the nature of domestic abuse. I felt it was important work, to bear witness to their lives. I organized and collected data for the professor’s study with greater efficiency and zeal than he did. I remembered all the women, all the crimes committed against them, and kept their stories close to my heart. These women were my secret compatriots.

They inspired me and horrified me. I'd referred scores of them to the Rape Crisis Center, but I never contacted them myself.

Years later during my recovery, my therapist told me I needed to figure out a way to live in my body. She encouraged my interest in belly dance, and her fervent belief in its goodness ultimately convinced me to go. Habib was something to aspire to, but she was also an intimidating figure. Doctors and physical therapists were cautious about recommending physical activities they didn't know anything about; they didn't want me to backslide or overdo. My therapist's approach was concerned, parental, encouraging. I wanted her approval. I was just dying for a reason to try it.

A year after I started taking Middle Eastern dance classes, I had my first performance. I'd put a lot into preparing for it. I'd rehearsed the choreography countless times in my bedroom in the weeks before the show, trying to move my arms gracefully over my head, snapping my hips, undulating left and then right, working hard to perfect the circle-and-a-half that always seemed to elude me in class. Before I fell asleep at night I'd run through the dance in my head.

All those pent up emotions I'd tamped down over the years also went into designing a costume, hand sewing a hundred coins onto a bra, trimming a sequined fuchsia vest with black and gold braid. Acquiring scarves and coins and sequins for a hip belt fired my imagination. During those increasingly warm days that spring, I sat outside, hunched over my improbable bra with a thimble on one finger, sewing, in the worst possible posture, my hopeful heart egging me on.

I was certainly a striking and rather overdressed figure when I appeared with my first-year class in the community center gym for our debut performance. The other women had kept it simple, leotards, hipscarves, circle skirts. I'd wished I had. My whole ensemble was uncomfortable as hell, the vest tight in the shoulders and under my breasts. The belt was held together with fabric stiffened by glue and safety pins that dug into the skin around my hips.

Our music, a song called “Bedouin Wedding,” began with a series of catcalls and random drumbeats before settling into a distinct four-four rhythm. Every muscle group in my body trembled as I stepped out onto the gym floor: shoulders, hands, knees.

I decided to walk in, sassy-girl fashion, hands on my hips, making sure to keep my head on an even plane and not bounce (a typical beginner mistake). I thought I was gliding, serpent-like, but I'm sure I bounced at least a time or two before I got to my place on the left side of the “stage.” We were to arrange ourselves out on the floor—as if we were gals meeting to celebrate a wedding. I nearly died from nerves trying to convey the wonderment and mystique of a bridal gathering on what was really a basketball court ringed with people on folding chairs.

My face felt taut from the smile I forced myself to make. I glanced at the other dancers and noticed forehead sweat and a look of deep concentration—fear. I thought my knees would give out, but my face relaxed when I saw people in the audience smiling back at us. The music cued the dance choreography and my heart skipped because I actually remembered it. I was stressed, but in a good way. A different kind of body memory was taking over. Hip hits, circle-and-a-

half, a little bit of shimmy, all the energy flowed rather naturally from my body to the audience.

I was a natural! I could perform! At the end of the dance I threw my arms up over my head and bowed and let relief and triumph flow through my being as people clapped.

After the show, a little girl came up to me and patted my breasts and ran her hands over the coins that draped over my chest like fish scales. Honestly, I felt great, like a real belly dancer.

Recently, one of my friends gave me a letterpress copy of a poem she'd made of Denise Levertov's "It Should be Visible." It's a poem about how the earth looks so beautiful from the moon, a blue-green orb with sapphire continents. Underneath the cooling oceans and swirling clouds are wars and many large and small tragedies. Underneath the smoke and fire, the earth is tender and fragile, and according to the poet, "suffers a canker which is devouring it." "It Should be Visible" has become one of my inspirations, a mantra. To me, the "it" in the poem is the violation that so many have experienced in our homes and in the world. Injustice, the poet says, "consumes joy," and should be visible.

When I was projecting my desire for freedom from aches and pains onto the figure of a belly dancer, I'd had enough of sickness. I'd been attracted to the beauty and grace of dance, but to achieve it for myself I had to go through the smoke and fire of my fears. It took awhile to understand what had been holding me back, or at least understand enough that I could let go.

Being raped didn't *make* me feel like I wasn't good enough, it was *evidence* of what I'd already suspected about myself. As a young woman, my confidence in myself could have fit on an Easter Seals stamp. That was the canker devouring me; the thing I couldn't see for a long time, my long-term belief that I'd deserved what happened to me.

Middle Eastern dance is about many things, but the expression of joy tops the list, where it manifests in vibrations and shimmies that convey ecstasy and pleasure. Most Middle Eastern dancers find it a source of power and permission to express themselves as artists and women. Historically, the dance known as *baladi* was exclusively performed for women by women as a rite of fertility and to strengthen abdominal muscles for childbirth. It later evolved to include ceremonies of all types, and the classical female dance solo known as *raks sharki* became an expression of Middle Eastern cultural traditions. A big part of my recovery process was tapping into this reservoir of dance that spoke unequivocally to the female body.

Belly dancing put me back in my body, refreshed my soul, helped me grow up. I have a relationship with Middle Eastern dance now. It's a love that's gone past infatuation. I feel conflicts with its physical demands, because as much as I love it, I'll never excel at it. I'm consciously aware of my body's abilities and shortcomings. Still, I'm grateful. I have a life my body can enjoy. I can shimmy and undulate with the best of them now. I've achieved Habib-ness.

Even after all these years, as soon as I cross the threshold of a dance studio, my mind empties and my spirit feels lighter. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, or bending my torso toward my knees during warm-ups, I feel like I'm tapping into something that has long been known to me, but it took belly dance to help me understand it. The real satisfaction of the dance form, for me, is in the energy I gather from repetition and practice, the mastery of movement with other women who have their own compelling reasons for why this is important. I revel in the satiny texture of a well-worn dance floor on my bare feet as I line up behind the other students. I know the shape of at least a hundred hips by heart, fellow dancers and teachers who have taught me how to dance. Everytime I move, I hear a reassuring jingle from the light metallic coins draping my hipscarf.